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ABSTRACT

A brief overview of mental retardation defines the concept, discusses incidence in the general population, describes characteristics of mentally retarded individuals, and discusses educational implications. References for further reading, as well as organizational resources, are provided. (JW)

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MENTAL RETARDATION

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What is meant by "mental retardation"?

The definition of the American Association on Mental Deficiency (1976) is widely accepted:

> Mental retardation refers to significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period.

Subaverage means a score of two standard deviations below the mean on the individual intelligence test. *Adaptive behavior* refers to the individual's adjustments to tasks of everyday life. Deficits in adaptive behavior may be observed in communication skills, socialization, academic learning, and vocational competence, and will vary according to the age of the individual.

It should be noted that the AAMD definition makes no mention of cause or prognosis, as a more medically oriented explanation might. Although more than 200 specific causes have been identified, in the majority of cases the exact reasons for the retardation are unknown. Except for a small percentage of cases that require medical intervention, treatment and educational programming are not related to etiology, but rather to the individual's functioning level and learning styles.

How many students are mentally retarded?

Depending upon the definition and measurement approach used, estimates of numbers of mentally retarded persons range from 1% of the general population (when relying on the adaptive behavior measurement) to 3% (when the IQ score is emphasized). Individual state reports to the federal government in 1978-1979 revealed variations in reported prevalence percentages from .66 (Alaska) and .58 (South Dakota) to 3.79 (South Carolina) and 3.89 (Alabama).

What are some typical characteristics of mentally retarded individuals?

Many authorities agree that mentally retarded individuals develop in the same way that nonretarded persons do, but at a slower rate, and they reach a lower overall level of functioning. Others suggest that persons with retardation may manifest deficits in particular cognitive areas such as attention, perception, and memory. Depending on the extent of the retardation—mild, moderate, severe, or profound—individuals will exhibit varying levels of maturation, academic achievement, and social and vocational adequacy.

What are the educational implications of mental retardation?

There are several important points to consider when working with mentally retarded persons, including the importance of using concrete rather than abstract materials, providing prompt and systematic feedback, emphasizing success, and proceeding in small, sequential steps with frequent reviews. Other approaches stress the need for obtaining and holding the student's attention and structuring learning of simple, everyday tasks that nonretarded persons learn incidentally. It is crucial that tasks learned in one setting be generalized to others. As with all education, individualization is a keystone of successful instruction.

Mildly retarded ("educable") students are usually served in the regular classroom with resource support. Moderately retarded ("trainable") students are frequently served in special classes, with emphasis on self-help and vocational as opposed to academic skills. Students with severe and profound mental retardation frequently have additional handicaps and require instruction designed to promote basic communication and daily living skills. Career and vocational education, designed to promote the individual's maximum independence, are important components of the educational program.

GENERAL REFERENCES

Cegelka, P. T., & Prehm, H. J. *Mental retardation: From categories to people.* 1982. ($24.50 from Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1300 Alum Creek Dr., Columbus OH 43216)

Chinn, P. C., Drew, C. J., & Logan, D. R. *Mental retardation: A life cycle approach.* 1979. ($16.95 from C. V. Mosby Co.; 11830 Westline Industrial Dr., St. Louis MO 63146)

MacMillan, D. L. *Mental retardation in school and society.* 1982. (Available from Little, Brown & Co., 34 Beacon St., Boston MA 02106)

Payne, J. S., & Patton, J. R. *Mental retardation.* 1981. ($26.95 from Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1300 Alum Creek Dr., Columbus OH 43216)

Reynolds, M. C., & Birch, J. W. *Teaching exceptional children in all America's schools.* 1982. ($19.95; CEC member price $16.95, The Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Dr., Reston VA 22091)

Sellin, D. F. *Mental retardation. Nature, needs, and advocacy.* 1979. ($33.57 from Allyn & Bacon, Inc., College Division, Link Dr., Rockleigh NJ 07647)

EC 200 566

REFERENCES FOR PARENTS

Cunningham, C., & Sloper, P. *Helping your exceptional baby: A practical and honest approach to raising a mentally handicapped child.* 1980. ($12.95 hardcover, $6.95 paper from Pantheon Books, 201 E. 50th St., New York NY 10022)

Stabler, E. M. *Primer for parents of a mentally retarded child.* ($6.25 from Association for Retarded Citizens of the United States, 2501 Avenue J, P.O. Box 6109, Arlington TX 76011)

RESOURCES

American Association on Mental Deficiency
5101 Wisconsin Avenue, N.W., Suite 405
Washington DC 20016
202/686-5400

Publications: *Mental Retardation* (bimonthly)
American Journal of Mental Deficiency (bimonthly)

Association for Retarded Citizens of the United States
2501 Avenue J
Arlington TX 76011
817/640-0204
800/433-5255

Publication: *Action Together/Information Exchange* (monthly)

International League of Societies for Persons with Mental Handicap
12 Rue Forestiere
B-1050 brussels, Belgium

People First International (self advocacy group for mentally retarded persons)
P.O. Box 12642
Salem OR 97304
503/362-0336

Division on Mental Retardation
The Council for Exceptional Children
1920 Association Drive
Reston VA 22091

Publication: *Education and Training of the Mentally Retarded* (quarterly)

President's Committee on Mental Retardation
North Bldg., Room 4057
330 Independence Avenue S.W.
Washington, DC 20201
202/245-7634

Special Olympics, Inc.
1701 K Street, N.W., Suite 203
Washington DC 20006
202/331-1346

WANT MORE INFORMATION?

ERIC/CEC has a number of information sources on mental retardation including:

- ERIC Information Analysis Products such as *What Research and Experience Say to the Teacher of Exceptional Children: Reasoning Ability of Mildly Retarded Learners*, by Herbert Goldstein and Marjorie T. Goldstein. ($7.00; CEC member price $5.95 from The Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Dr., Reston VA 22091)
- ERIC reports such as *ERIC Exceptional Child Education Report: Post Secondary Vocational Education for Mentally Retarded Adults*, by James W. Moss. (Available from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service, P.O. Box 190, Arlington VA 22210, ED 188 379)
- Custom computer searches of the ERIC/CEC databases on your particular topic.

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